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Silva, Teodoro Oral History Interview: Members of the Hispanic Community

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Interview with Teodoro Silva
Interviewed by Joseph O'Grady, 1990

JO: When did you first arrive in Holland?

TS: Actually we used to be migrants, what you call migrant summer help. When we stayed here for good, I was 15 or 14 years old. To be truly, I started at Heinz when I was 16 years old, but that was the first year that we stayed here.

JO: Do you remember the year it was?

TS: No, not really to be honest.

JO: General, like...?

TS: I have been here with Sligh for 38 years. And about six or eight with Heinz. I am 57 right now.

JO: So about 19...you've been here since you were 15.

TS: Yes.

JO: And you have been here 57 years.

TS: I am 57 right now.

JO: So you were born in about 1933?

TS: I was born in 1932, exactly.

JO: So 1932...so approximately about 1947 you arrived in Holland.

TS: Possible.

JO: When you said that you stayed here permanently when you were about 15.

TS: We stayed here because we used to come as a migrant you know, work in the summer time and go back in the winter time. We used to do sugar beets, carrots, onions, anything that was summer time labor. We stayed here, we did some sugar beets too.

That was last thing we used to do. We would do sugar beets. Once they were done we went back home.

JO: Where was home?

TS: In Texas. In Laferia.

JO: Is that by San Antonio?

TS: No this is close to Brownsville. Between Brownsville and McCollin, Texas.

JO: Was it an urban area or a rural area in Texas?

TS: It was a real small town, real small. It had one blinker light and that was it. Shut your eyes and you would go right past it.

JO: What part of Holland did you originally settle in?

TS: Right in Holland. We stayed at Rough Range farm on the east side of town. We stayed there for about a year, year and a half, year round for the first winter. My dad bought a place, we moved to Douglas. Douglas and my sister for a while until we could afford to rent our own place. Then my dad bought a basement house on _____ Avenue here in Holland. That's when we started staying in Holland for good. That is where we all got finished, my dad finished the place up. Whoever wasn't home yet. At that time we had three or four home and the rest were married already.

JO: How many people came with you to Holland from Texas?

TS: Mostly just I guess my family. We had our own truck we carried everything.

JO: How many members were within your family?

TS: Let's see there was...six, seven, my mom and dad so there was eight of us.

JO: So it was six brothers and sisters and then your mom and dad?

TS: So this way we moved around whenever and however we wanted. There was no wait for anybody but us.

JO: Were you the oldest in the family? Or the youngest?

TS: I was the second from the youngest. This is how we got started in Holland. It was home we grew and got married. We all had our homes in Holland.

JO: Do you keep in contact?

TS: Oh, very much. A lot more then what people do nowadays. You don't see so much of that no more. I don't know, for some reason or another people just don't _____ like that used to. You know you used to be taking visits to each other more. Not no more. Myself I don't visit my relations like we used to. Of course, I've got my own family to worry about, my grandkids. There is just not too much time left after that. And we both work full-time. She works nights and I work days so whenever we do have time we like to spend it together and with the grandkids too.

JO: So you first came to Holland as a migrant family?

TS: Right.

JO: And what were the conditions in Laferia?

TS: Laferia, it was kind of like a Florida. Fruit, carrots, all produce stuff, seasonal stuff. So once I was done, in fact we had our own truck so we did this work there with our truck. My brother had a truck, my older brother and my dad had his own truck so we had people from Mexico to work for us on picking up fruits, grapefruit that come off the trees for juices, going to fields and get carrots. A lot of produce. Any

produce they raised in Texas, we were involved with it. Hauling it, we mostly had people from Mexico working under my dad and all my brothers. I was just a little kid at the time. And whatever I could I had to go too, because that's what my dad was doing.

JO: Do you remember if there was economic hardship in Laferia that basically brought you to Holland?

TS: Well, you see actually we used to come to pick cotton first with other truckers. And we didn't come to far we came right in the state of Texas, west Texas. We came and picked cotton there for a few weeks. Then we would go back and my dad was underground water system, sprinklers, whatever you call them, the piping of water underground. That's what my dad's job was. And he was the only one that was working when we were all young. So he did have a rough life bringing us all up, and we were thankful when we grew up and appreciated what he had done for us. So he did have a really hard life trying to raise us all..._____...at a time. You know after a few times we did come to the west sections to pick cotton we managed to save money my dad, and he bought his own truck. And my oldest brother came out of the service. He bought his own truck so we combined both of them and we had a little easier life then we had before.

JO: So conditions were better here in Holland than in Laferia?

TS: Oh yes. A lot better because we came here by the time we came to Michigan we already had a farm to come to. By the time we got here onions were planted already, carrots, whatever and we need a week to help farmers clean all of that stuff. And

once the thing was ready to harvest we did it for the farmer too. When they didn't have anything which most of the time the lady had it, the lady we worked for. She pretty much kept our family busy in the summer. She used to raise carrots and onions and sugar beets. You name it she had it, so we were pretty much set for the summer when we came here. We didn't have to jump like a lot of people have to do now a days. Be here two or three months and go to Florida and all this. All we did was come to, I don't know if you've ever heard of this place close to Gun Lake, Michigan. It is quite a popular place now, the lake, a well known lake now. We used to live about 10-15 miles from there. A place they used to call Orangeville, Michigan. It had a little store and a little bar. That is all there was to it. That is where we used to live around in that little area. And we found out we could make a lot better money then picking cotton and all that stuff. We used to come over here for the summer and go back and do what we could over there when we got back there while the fruit was in tool production. Like I said we used to, anything was at that time you know carrots, onions, oranges, and grapefruit, anything we could do with trucks we got in my dad's and my brother's. So once we started rolling we were coming from here with our own trucks. Like I said, everything was a lot easier then. Before my dad use to support all of us. We do know what it is to live the hard way. There was so many things my dad could not afford to give us even if he wanted to. It was not like kids nowadays. Kids want something now they get it. Well maybe there were some times where they could, but not my family. My dad just couldn't do it.

JO: What was your first job in Holland?

TS: At H. J. Heinz.

JO: How long did you work there for?

TS: I believe I worked there about six years at least. From there I moved to Holland Furnace.

JO: Where are you employed now?

TS: Where am I employed now? I am at Sligh Furniture, located in Holland and Zeeland.

JO: And you have worked there for quite a while?

TS: Thirty-eight years.

JO: Did any of your children attend school here in Holland?

TS: They both did. St. Francis, our Catholic school and West Ottawa. They both graduated from West Ottawa School.

JO: St. Francis de Sales?

TS: Yes. We have a boy and a girl. My boy is here and he lives in Holland town, west 10th Street. His name is Edward Silva.

JO: And he is approximately about...

TS: Thirty.

JO: And your daughter is?

TS: Early twenties.

JO: Her name?

TS: Rosie, Rosa.

JO: What were your impressions of the school system?

TS: We loved it, loved it. We always thought quite highly of West Ottawa High School.

JO: St. Francis as well you thought very highly of?

TS: Oh yes. The reason we sent them there to raise them up to give them what my dad couldn't give us. You see even though we were as poor as we were my mom and my dad tried to bring us up as religious as they could bring us up you know. So we fared well. They've done their part, we can do a little better then what they could at that time. So we sent them to St. Francis, and they went through the whole thing there. Started from kindergarten and finished there and graduated from West Ottawa, both of them. My boy has four kids, three girls and a boy.

JO: Rosa just has your grandson?

TS: Grandson.

JO: So through the school system you feel the school system did a beneficial job in educating your children?

TS: I do. And my wife too. She is well pleased with the school, with both of them.

JO: Did your children speak Spanish when they...?

TS: No, they were both born here and they did speak Spanish. In fact, we used to poke fun at them the way they did do Spanish which it wasn't very nice of us to do that, but you know here when they're talking English all of the time and once in a great while they would use Spanish and it just didn't sound like the real stuff. But they did what they could and they managed to get around with it. What we wanted them was not to get away from his own language. We wanted them to keep the language and use it as much as they could. My boy does. I tell you he says his language and he knows how to use it and where to use it. I give him a lot of credit for that.

JO: So they are both fluent in both languages?

TS: Oh yes. In fact after he graduated he worked in the Speedy carwash to earn his own money before school was out. And after school was out he used to keep the carwash job, Speedy Carwash, and work at Heinz still at night. Which you know, he did learn something from us. He was willing to do his share to help himself get around in his own life. And my daughter the same thing. She graduated and she started working before school was all done. She finished school, shortly after that she married, things just didn't go the way they were supposed to. So separated just what we had out of it which we are proud of it.

JO: How long has she been separated from her husband?

TS: Well, she was separated for a few years shortly after he was born. And he didn't try to make any attempts at all until he was four or five years, which was to her place. She remarried. And she is going to have another kid in another two-three weeks. And she is happily married and that is all we want for her to be happy.

JO: Were both of her spouses and your son's wife Hispanic as well?

TS: Yeah. In fact my daughter is a teacher's aide at West Ottawa. She does work with the migrants which they have improved a lot of her Spanish too. She had to speak Spanish there even though she doesn't know it perfectly, but she managed to get around with the kids. She loves it. She loves that job. She likes to work around kids I guess. As long as you get around with them alright. So far so good. And she has done that for the last two or three years. So she's well pleased with her job.

JO: Did you know much English when you first arrived in Holland?

TS: To be honest with you, not as good as my kids do yet. No, not then, because as I told you, we were migrants and we weren't going full-time to school at all. Probably maybe half of the school year and that ain't enough to pick up much. So we had to help my dad somehow. But we got along okay with what we did know, but we didn't know as much as my kids. Of course, they were raised in a different country, a different state, different kind of people.

JO: Were you born in Mexico?

TS: No, I was born in Laferia.

JO: Did you speak Spanish basically in Laferia?

TS: Yes.

JO: Were you exposed to any English while you were there?

TS: Oh yeah. We used to live there with English but not as much as we did after we stayed here. Once we stayed here we just maybe 95% of the time we were using English. And that is why our boy and the girl you know they got a way from Spanish.

JO: Would you speak even English in the household too?

TS: Yes, we do.

JO: Alright now these are the questions I like to term as sort of a little harder to answer. This first section was sort of your background. What were your first impressions of the city? Did you like Holland when you first saw it?

TS: No, because the people were too strict. Well, let's put it this way. I felt like we were discriminated.

JO: How were you discriminated against in Holland?

TS: Well, you know the people they were mostly Dutch. The way we figured they thought they were better than we were because this is their city. That's my opinion. So that is the way I felt. But finally we got along alright because we stayed here so many years. But, I really didn't think I was going to stay here because that is how I felt about these people and I thought maybe I'd go to a different city, different people and everything. Something we weren't used to. But gradually we started getting along better and in fact we started learning Dutch. That's how well we got around with it. We were working for a nursery in Holland too and there were mostly Dutch people in there and we got along so good with them that they started teaching us Dutch. Not that much, but enough to get around.

JO: Was Dutch used a lot in Holland?

TS: Very much.

JO: Did they ever show any interest in learning Spanish?

TS: Oh no, no, no.

JO: Did you ever attempt to teach them any Spanish?

TS: No they just, the way they acted like they don't want any part of us. We were here to do a job and that's all they cared about. So it was hard when we came here because they weren't used to us either maybe. Because at that time you know that's when used to have those German prisoners around here. They used to have us people coming from Texas as migrants, and they had German prisoners in the field too. So Germans were more like Dutch people, but they're from Germany. But we are all the

same inside no matter what color we are on the outside we are all the same thing on the inside.

JO: Can you remember any encounter or specific incident where you were discriminated against, like housing?

TS: Well, one thing I did noted was that they were always staring at us. Kept staring at us and using Dutch language among each other. We didn't know what they were talking about.

JO: Would you do the same thing to them like if there was a Dutch individual walking by your family?

TS: We try not to use Spanish among white people. Instead we hardly ever use any Spanish out of the house. We use Spanish once in a while or when we visit our boy. Not even then because all of his kids use English most of the time. Spanish we use very rarely, but every once in a while we use Spanish. It is not that we don't like their language you know, but we figure maybe just people will feel like we did at the time. You know they'll probably feel, "well you know they must be talking about us because why are they using Spanish?" You would probably feel the same way which we figure is not polite at all. That is my opinion any way. It wouldn't be very good for me to talk Spanish in front of you not knowing. First thing that would probably come to your mind, "well they must be talking something they don't want me to know." That is why I don't use Spanish among the people. We knew what we felt like when the Dutch were talking Dutch in front of us. So I took it from there. Well we are here, we know how to talk English, let's use the English language. And I am

sure you people would like that better because myself when I hear the migrants in camp talk in Spanish now I say to myself, "It will make you people feel better too." Because I am sure don't like to hear that. I don't think it is too nice at all not to use your English. A lot of them they use this high voice and you know that sounds worse yet. You know among you white people. When we use Spanish we kind of keep it on a low voice just as much as possible to ourselves. Anyway we do.

JO: It sounds like basically what went through your mind is that you're trying to adjust to Holland and to the area and become part of it. That was your goal throughout the whole process?

TS: In fact, when I hear kids around that I know them and they start using Spanish, if I know the kids I go and tell them, "hey, use the language here--don't use nobody else's." I mean it's their language but you know how to talk English, use English because it sounds so funny when you hear Spanish kids a whole bunch of them talking in Spanish. And we always like my boy and I like to kid around we always give them a nickname and after the kids because we aren't used to that no more. That's just it, we talk English all the time no matter where we are at. But once in a while we gotta remember we are Spanish we've gotta keep up our language.

JO: Do you remember any violent incidences? Were you ever physically approached by a white resident of Holland?

TS: No, never. No, we've never had that problem. We pretty well kept to ourselves. There wasn't so many of us around at the time. So we kept away as much as possible. But we had to do what we did we went back where we lived.

JO: As more Hispanics came within Holland did you feel there was a sort of racial tensions between the two communities? Like the Hispanic community and the Dutch community just coming together?

TS: Actually one thing, I think those people acted like we did when we first came. You know I think those Spanish people that came after we did that they felt like we did because they probably felt like, "who are they to tell us what to do and this and that and that." And then by that time of course all of the Spanish people that came, they came all at once. There never used to be so many of them I figure in the last 10 or 12 years. So like you said you know, we felt like we were part of the city now ourselves we've been here so many years and we kind of get used to it. We feel like they should join us and be part of the city too and try to get along with them as much as possible. Of course my motto always tells, two bads are not going to make a right one. So when we get together we have our own little parties among our closest friends. We are not the type of people that go out to dances and this and that every weekend. So especially my wife, she is different. I like to go out and party and all that stuff myself but I like to keep it down to a limit, to know at least what you are doing is not wrong or offending other people. So in other words we are not that big of a party people like I said. Just among ourselves and real close friends. This way we can avoid a lot of problems. You know there are so many people that had a few beers and "I'm mister muscle" or "you're nothing, I am." So I feel myself that we are part of the city now and I feel like well let's join us and we've gotta be all the same now we are living together here. Do the best we can.

JO: Can you ever remember any incident where a group of Hispanics and a group of Dutch settlers started any sort of riot or anything?

TS: No, we never had any problems like that.

JO: Never a civil rights movement?

TS: No, never.

JO: Was it ever thought of? You know did the Hispanics ever get together and ever think of marching on the city?

TS: No. Never.

JO: Do you have a reason for that? Why the Hispanics never really thought of?

TS: Well like I said there weren't that many at a time. All these people that came they just came like I said maybe 10-12 years back. There are places where they do that. Here I never heard anyone say, "let's get together and do this." Never.

JO: What does the Hispanic community offer to Holland? What do you think are the Hispanic community's good points? What does the Hispanic community give to Holland?

TS: Well. I don't know how I would answer that.

JO: Do you know, can you remember any good aspects of the Hispanic community that how has Holland benefitted from the Hispanic community?

TS: Well I think everything is okay as far as that goes, housing and all that. But like now I know when we were here we never had a chance for, we couldn't afford it, let's put it this way, to have a store like they do now. You know people have got stores. They get an opportunity to get started.

JO: Do you belong to any organizations?

TS: None.

JO: What would you really like to see changed in Holland?

TS: There isn't too much, it really did change already. The people, the Dutch people, they are way different from when we came. We get along with the homogenic people that come from other countries a lot better then when they used to. Other then that I guess we all get a fair break all the way around. There is some people that kind of reach for the moon when you can't do it. It is impossible to satisfy everybody's opinion. Some people they just want to go hog wild asking for "hey, how come I can't do this or can't have this and that." Well I only use those kinds of words on so many occasions. Rome was not built in one day. It takes time to get what you want. If you really want it eventually it will come your way. The right way because like I said, two bads are not going to make a good one. And I guess if you go at it the right way what you want you are going to get it eventually one way or the other. Not by force, but if your going to do it by force that ain't going to pay off. But I think if you go at it the right way you can get what you want nowadays. No matter who you are, what you are, what color you are.

JO: Do you no longer feel discriminated against in Holland then?

TS: Not practically ever. [pause] Holland has changed a lot for the good.

JO: It is an equal, open community now?

TS: Yes it is because there is Spanish kids that work in a lot of stores in different kinds of businesses. They get opportunities where they never had, us Spanish people. They

have it now. All they should do is just go at it and give it a check. Prove themselves, let's put it this way. There is no discrimination that I can see. A big change for the best. There is plenty of openings, plenty of jobs for kids that want to go places.

JO: Do most Hispanics share your views that Holland has changed?

TS: Us people that have been here many years, they do. They agree, we all learn pretty much we do the same thing. They have really changed. But like I said there is some people that your never gonna satisfy anyway. No matter how good the city gets or how much improvement it gets, there is always a rotten apple among the rest of them. But you will find that no matter where go, or who you are. There is always somebody who is never going to be happy. Me, my wife, we're perfectly happy, we're pleased the way it is. We had never had work, where she worked where I worked. We had like discriminated with all the _____ we can and my wife had been there same time I very much liked to, and she had been asked and we had talked about it me and her and my kids about there people who feel they have been discriminated. And she would answer the same question given she would have answered the same way that I'm gonna. But what we have gone through and what it is now there is no such thing as discrimination. Maybe some of us feel there is because they have got to get a different attitude. They take a different. Maybe one thing is too easy to be given to them, and like I said you want something you work for it and you get it.

JO: I just want to backtrack just one second back to where you first lived in Holland.

What condition was the neighborhood in, the house?

TS: There was a basement house, just the basement. We lived there for quite a few years.

JO: Was the neighborhood around your basement house a Hispanic neighborhood or was it a white neighborhood?

TS: It was white.

JO: Was it in a good condition neighborhood?

TS: It was. It was in good condition. There were not many houses there. Whoever was there we got along with them good.

JO: Were you the only Hispanics within that area?

TS: Right.

JO: You felt treated differently among your neighbors though?

TS: Yes, they really felt really good. We had plenty of room and then we could call it our own house, our own. It was about two and a half acres that my dad bought at that time. And there weren't that many neighbors. When the neighbors did grow and the neighborhood grew we had been around there longer than anybody and everybody there. So we went to the big league when he bought that.

JO: What do you see in the future for Holland and the Hispanic community?

TS: I think there is a really good future for people who have the skill. [pause] There is a lot of people that got talents still. They can go places if they want to, the opportunities are there. They have got a chance just as much as anybody else. Like I said no matter what color you are, who you are, where you come from, if you want to apply for it you can have it too. That's the way I feel. When I came here, when

we built this house here I went to my office where I work now and they needed a little information from the bank. So I went in there and told them how I stood with the company. They gave me every information the bank wanted. They asked me if there is anything we can help with to help you get this house loan, just let us know. So the reason why I stayed there is because they treated me good.

JO: Everywhere you go in Holland you feel treated real well?

TS: Very good. I got around to a lot of places. I got to know a lot of places. I used to deliver stuff for them at one time. I got to know a lot of different people, a lot of different cities, a lot of different experiences I went through while I was doing that. I ain't got nothing to complain about. I had a good life.

JO: You are very satisfied here in Holland?

TS: I am and my wife is. And I think my kids are too. But there are some people like I said that are never satisfied no matter how much you do for them there is always still a little grudge there. We just listen to them kind of people and we keep quiet. I said to my wife, that's a lot of talk, let them rest and then say so. Do we know different? We'll keep it to ourselves. Why make them feel bad?

JO: Thank you very much, Mr. Silva.